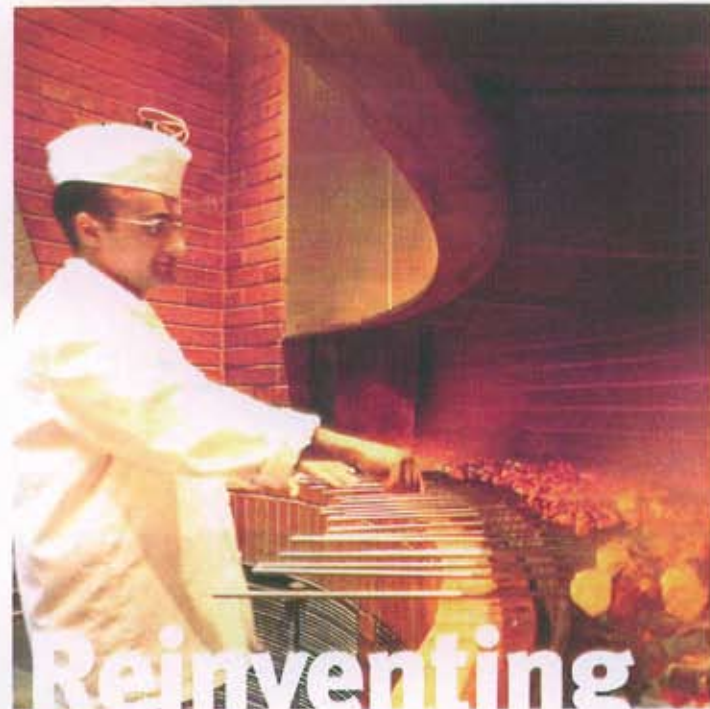


TRENDS FOOD & BEVERAGE



Reinventing Tradition



by Karim el Asmar

Can the Levantine food and beverage industry reinvent itself?

Levantine cuisine is maturing as a new generation of chefs and restaurateurs start exploring new horizons. This exploration is coming in various formats, such as the introduction of new design, presentations, branding, and concepts.

Traditional Lebanese cuisine migrates

For a long time, the Lebanese cuisine catered mainly to a nostalgic clientele. During the 20th century, Lebanese cuisine spread worldwide, and gained fame and

renown, driven by the Lebanese diaspora. It was also carried by skilled chefs relocating to the Gulf. As a result a Lebanese restaurant became a must-have feature outlet in any developing hotel in the region. In addition, these Lebanese restaurants integrated various other regional specialties such as Aleppo, Armenian, and Turkish.

Lebanese cuisine was perceived as exotic but high-calorie food, and most people were only familiar with mezze and grilled meats.

Restaurants, featuring names such as Al Arz, or Byblos, or Baalbeck, were loyal to their Lebanese heritage: pictures featuring Lebanese landscapes graced the walls, and dishes were served in traditional clay plates. In all prominent restaurants, such as Mounir and Burj al Hamam, or even in smaller businesses, the set-up was similar: large rectangular tables with white table cloth, white plates, stainless steel cutlery, V-shaped tumbler glasses, and bamboo chairs; the head waiter in a black suit and a red tie, the waiters in a white shirt and dark pants. Today however, new Lebanese restaurateurs are challenging these habits. Liza's restaurant in Paris is adopting a whole new approach to Lebanese cuisine and is already gaining popularity. Philippe Massoud is launching a new Lebanese restaurant on New York's Fifth Avenue and will integrate Lebanese cuisine into the certified international wall of fame.

Venturing into modern design, the restaurant exposes a transparent wine cellar and round tables instead of the classic rectangular tables. The same shake-up touch has now marked the branch in Jal el Dib. La Tabkha restaurant also proposed a new version of a Lebanese restaurant, displaying an open kitchen, offering a salad bar, and developing extensive branding. Moreover, La Tabkha focuses on a new dimension of the Lebanese cuisine, neglecting the mezze and developing the 'home-cooking' menu. Dishes like *kebbe bil sayniyeh*, *arn-abiyyeh*, or *kafta bil furn* used to be at best featured in the *plat du jour* section of a restaurant. At La Tabkha, these items are part of the main menu.

On the other hand, Lebanon is also observing the emergence of a new style of traditional Lebanese restaurants based on the mountain/village theme, the *erzals* and the tents, often a hybrid structure of tent and basic building structure. The menu is simplified around the theme of *tabbouleh*, *hommos*, vegetables, pickles, and grills. Two renowned restaurants are Al Erzal in Hrajel and Khaymet el Hor at the InterContinental Mountain Resort and Spa Mzaar.

Lebanon is observing the emergence of a new style of traditional restaurants

The revised edition

However, in the new millennium, traditional Lebanese restaurants no longer fit the expectations of modern clientele. The regional food and beverage scene is changing, and Levantine cuisine is reinventing itself. We are observing the emergence of numerous concepts that bring new dynamism to the scene. When the restaurant Sultan Ibrahim opened in Beirut Central District, it presented a new version of a Lebanese restaurant. It still offers the same menu as its predecessor in Jal el Dib, but the décor and setting are innovative.

Changes have also touched the cuisine itself. Some of the new generation of chefs are already introducing new tastes and exploring new techniques. For example, during the press gala lunch for Saint Joseph University, Chef Maroun Chedid served a *verrine* of goat labneh and a mousse of Cana olives emulsified with azoth. Pastry chef Charles Azar served a fusion of *esmallieh* and *crème caramel* at the Atelier practice restaurant at the Saint Joseph University Institut de Gestion des Entreprises.

More to the point, commercial restaurants have also started venturing into new Lebanese and



CAFÉ BLANC RESTAURANT

Levantine cuisine. Café Blanc restaurant in ABC Mall, Beirut, has successfully adapted traditional platters, such as *tabbouleh*, *fattouch*, and chicken and mutton skewers.

Concepts and lingo

Culinary revolution sometimes takes form in the adaptation of a certain item, or the adoption of a special ingredient. For example, *Mayrig*, a traditional Armenian restaurant in Gemmayze, introduced *hommos* with *sujuk*, in addition to the traditional take on *hommos*, with meat *pignons*, on its menu.

Using an item as the central theme of a restaurant also attests to the dynamism of the culinary industry. Foul Hommos & Co and Balilas themed their restaurants around the grain-based platters, while the *Kabab-ji* outlets centered it on kebabs, and Chawarma based it on the famous meat presentation that gave it the name. However, their menus still offer the usual variety of Lebanese platters.

Another characteristic of modernization is the trend of re-transcription of Arabic pronunciation in Latin letters for the menus. This method was vastly popularized by *Zaatar w Zeit*. It is no

longer surprising to read *manzouche* or *lahm bi zajin*, to name but a few examples. This transliteration has invaded the lexicon of some restaurants; for example Al Mayass, a traditional Aleppo and Armenian restaurant in Beirut, integrated this vocabulary into its menu.

Communicating novelty

However, while such gimmicks do bring a refreshing touch – often enhanced with lively graphic design – they may prove inaccessible to a non-Arabic-speaking community that is unfamiliar with the menu. Restaurant brands seeking an international expansion will have to seriously consider their concept and their communication policies. (Article on franchising, Hospitality News Middle East, February-March 2007, issue 50).

Communication is a new major side-dish in the Levantine food and beverage industry. Traditionally, communication was kept in the shade, but today's restaurateurs are predominantly brand-oriented. A landmark such as *Ahwet el Ezez* in Gemmayze, Beirut, may not need to work on specific branding and communication. However, in the brand-addicted environment we evolve in, any

food and beverage concept wishing to expand will have to allow serious resources and investment at the level of the brand. The concept of *Leila*, with the story of *Leila* introducing the shop and the restaurant, is a good example.

Dynamic evolution ahead

Today, Levantine restaurants worldwide, such as Al Halabi at the Four Seasons Damascus, are aligning tradition with modernity, so that international clients can discover a new dimension of the Levantine cuisine. In fact, Al Halabi genuinely illustrates the new trend in Damascus, where all restaurants are exploring tradition with various

degrees of modernization. The Levantine food and beverage industry is revamping its identity. This reinvention is happening through a display of creativity in preparation, and an exploration of the way in which the Levantine experience is perceived by westerners. We can expect further innovations as restaurateurs engage on a journey of reinventing tradition.

Hodema s.a.l
P.O.Box 16-6364
Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: +961 1 381101
kasmar@hodema.net
www.hodema.net



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Yary Food SARL



Do more, sell more, make more of your bakery and pastry business

Beirut-Lebanon
T/F: +961 1 615977
M: +961 3 702462
yaryfood@hotmail.com

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